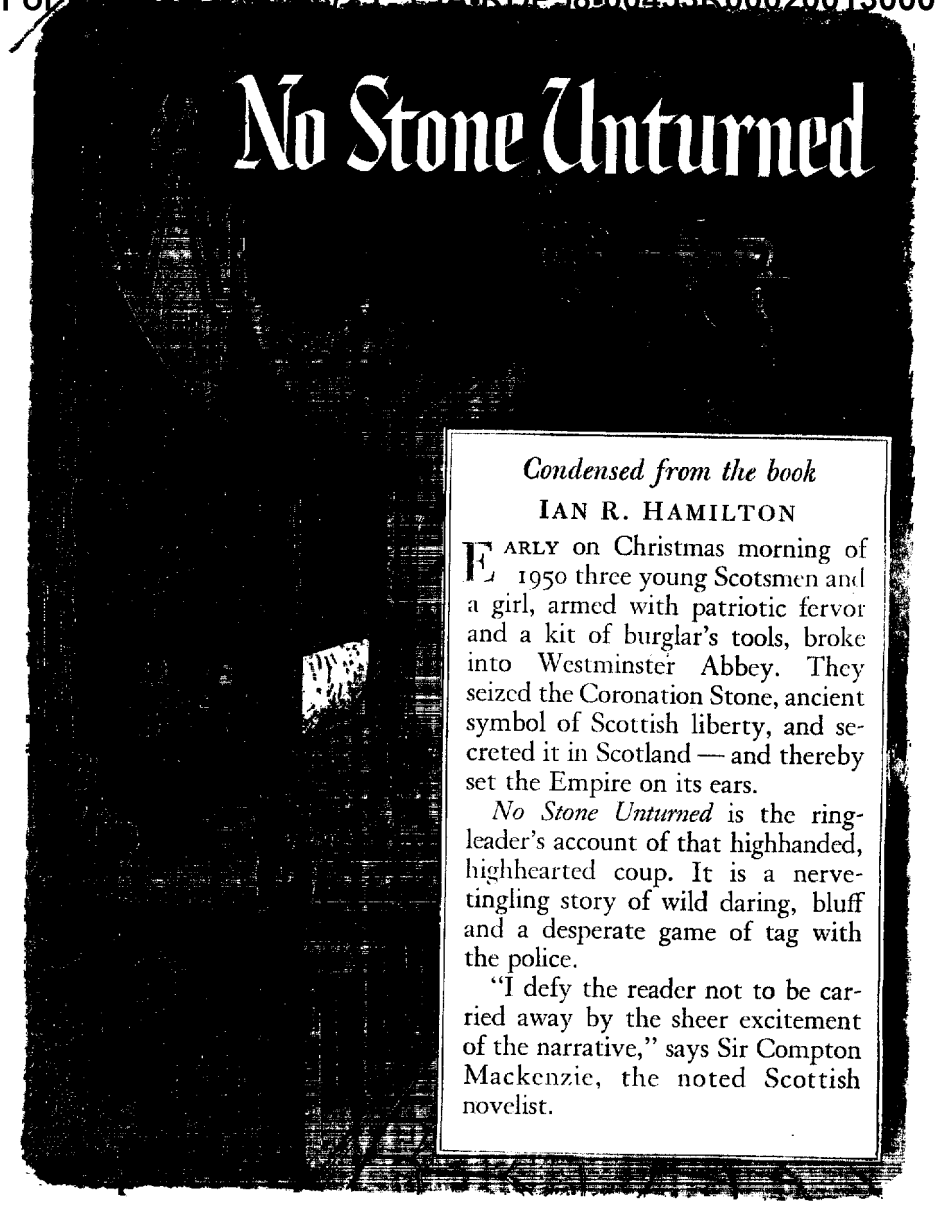
No Stone Unturned



Condensed from the book

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EARLY on Christmas morning of 1950 three young Scotsmen and a girl, armed with patriotic fervor and a kit of burglar's tools, broke into Westminster Abbey. They seized the Coronation Stone, ancient symbol of Scottish liberty, and secreted it in Scotland — and thereby set the Empire on its ears.

No Stone Unturned is the ringleader's account of that highhanded, highhearted coup. It is a nerve-tingling story of wild daring, bluff and a desperate game of tag with the police.

"I defy the reader not to be carried away by the sheer excitement of the narrative," says Sir Compton Mackenzie, the noted Scottish novelist.

I was going after the Stone. I enlisted the aid of a young man whom I shall call Neil, and we settled down to plan our campaign. We hoped to do something which might earn a place in the history books and would almost certainly earn ourselves English jailroom.

Toward the middle of November I went to Glasgow's Mitchell Library and withdrew all the books I could find which dealt with Westminster Abbey and the Stone of Destiny. (In the end the library slips with my name on them were the only concrete evidence the police had against me.) I waded through pages of description and history, studied photographs, drew maps, made calculations.

Armed with the figures, maps and plans, I approached a Glasgow businessman for £50 to finance the enterprise (the total expenditure was to be less than £70). When he saw that I was in deadly earnest, this ardent Nationalist was keen to help. He in turn introduced me to Robert Gray, a member of Glasgow Town Council. Both the businessman and Councilor Gray had in previous years been associated with abortive plots for recovery of the Stone. As our advisers they were able to act like a House of Lords with an impetuous Lower Chamber, and, throughout, they gave us invaluable assistance.

One night I went to London to reconnoiter. As my train crossed the border I was seized with shaking excitement. I thought of how my forefathers from Clydesdale had many times passed this way, in defense of Scotland's honor or bent on hearty plunder. But though I was traveling south with only the recovery of a block of stone as my aim, I did not think, considering the times, that my forefathers would be ashamed of me.

In London the next morning, this excitement was redoubled. It was a fine sensation to be at the heart of England not as a tourist but as a spy. I joined the handful of sightseers in Westminster Abbey, and for a considerable time moved about in the calm duskiness of the sanctuary. I already had a considerable knowledge of the building, but I particularly wanted to learn all I could about locks and doors.

The Stone was contained in a boxlike aperture under the seat of the Coronation Chair, in Edward the Confessor's Chapel. I examined it carefully. It is a block of roughhewn sandstone about 17 inches broad by 27 inches long, and 11 inches deep. It weighs more than 400 pounds. On either end, a few links of chain terminating in an iron ring provide handles for carrying it. A small lath along the front of the old oak chair held the Stone in place, and I saw that this could easily be removed without damage to the ancient workmanship.

Before I left I engaged one of the guides in conversation. How did they keep the place so clean — surely an army of cleaners came on every night when the Abbey closed.

pect, and a brave woman could fire the imagination of the world.

I put down my drink and spoke to her for the first time in ten minutes. "What are you doing at Christmas, Kay?"

"I'm going home," she said.

"I'm going to London to bring back the Stone of Destiny."

She laughed. "I mean it," I said, and I did. "Would you like to help?"

"No," she said, but she meant "Yes." "What can I do?"

Things happened rapidly thereafter. As our No. 3 man we acquired Gavin Vernon, a 24-year-old engineering student who has the Scotsman's delight in high and risky enterprise. He is quite short of stature, but of considerable physical strength, and his mad recklessness gets him into many scrapes that no dour Scot was designed for. As driver in chief his first act was to hire a car — a 12-year-old Ford.

With three people, our team was now complete and we were almost ready to leave. We met and went over our maps and diagrams as often as we had a spare moment to foregather. Meanwhile, I had collected a burglar's tool kit, including an immense 24-inch jimmy of which I was inordinately proud. With loving care, I had made myself a shoulder sling which left the jimmy hanging from armpit to trouser pocket. The files, wire, hacksaw, wrench and other tools of my new profession I carefully stowed about my person. Thus equipped, I would put on my coat, go down to a little café in Gibson Street and talk to my friends, with the delicious cold steel against me and a smile of sheer joy on my lips.

At the last minute we recruited a fourth man, Alan Stuart, who could bring an Anglia car. He was a tall young fellow, with a frank, boyish face and a crop of golden hair. He was only 20 and looked younger. Which was the more reliable, Alan or his Anglia car, I do not know. But I do know that I would go round the world with either of them and there would be laughter and confidence all the way.

At last, on the evening of Friday, December 22, we piled into the two cars and drove out of Glasgow on the road south.

It was afternoon of the next day when we reached London and shot along Whitehall, past Scotland Yard and the Houses of Parliament to the Abbey. Together we reconnoitered the Abbey.

Although we had had no sleep the previous night, we were all keen to have a go at it that same evening. So after an early dinner and a final council of war, we split into two parties, and Alan and Kay drove off to make themselves familiar with the route west to Dartmoor. If things went wrong I would not see them again until I had passed through prison.

Sitting in the old Ford, I raked in my grip, produced the burglar's tools and stowed them about me. When I had my coat on all you did

For the first time a wild hope flamed up that perhaps he would not hand me over to the police, who would be bound to search me. Then, as I moved, the jimmy slipped from its sling, and was held only by my arm pressed tight against my side. I broke out in a white sweat and, opening my eyes wide, said to myself: "I mustn't be sick. I mustn't be sick."

Then suddenly we were moving toward the door. Thinking I was sheltering in the Abbey because I had nowhere else to go, the watchman asked if I had any money. When I told him that I did, he led me down the steps and with a kindly word and a "Merry Christmas" let me out into the concourse of men with nothing on their consciences.

I had bungled a fine plot and let down as good a team of robbers as ever came out of Scotland. I could have wept with impotence and shame.

By uncanny good fortune I found Gavin quickly, and we went over to Trafalgar Square, where he had arranged to meet Kay and Alan. We all felt pretty sick. We considered trying the same plan again the following night, but gave it up as too dangerous. Another coarse and blundering attempt could only end in failure and bring disrepute down on our country and on our movement. But it was unthinkable that we should go home yet.

"We might break in from the outside," said Alan, who had not shown the slightest dismay in our initial failure. "Bruce watched his spider try seven times. We've only tried once. Let's go along to the Abbey and look for spiders."

We made several more excursions that night, prowling around the Abbey grounds to glean what information we could. It must have been well on into morning when we parked our two cars on a side street and tried, in spite of the bitter cold, to get a few snatches of sleep. It was not only that hotel rooms would have depleted our meager funds but in the cars we lived as a sort of military community, preserving our fragment of Scotland and our integrity of purpose, which we might have lost had we sought warmth and soft beds.

We spent the next day in and around the Abbey, which was filled with Christmas worshipers, ever on the lookout for the scrap of information which would give us a clue to a successful raid. Dusk fell on a raw, cheerless night, followed by a thin, freezing mist.

Kay had been feeling ill all day, and now she was white-faced and shivering with the flu. This seemed inevitably to mean the end of our expedition, but she would not hear of it. After exacting from me the most solemn promise that if there was to be any excitement whatsoever we would get her, she went to a cheap little hotel for a few hours of sleep.

Gavin, Alan and I then returned to the Abbey and the problem of

the license number of your car?"

Like a fool, I had forgotten to memorize it. "I don't know," I said. "I hired the car."

His questions got more and more difficult, for I could remember neither the name nor the address of the garage it came from. That had been Gavin's work, and although he sat just around the corner I did not want to refer the detective to him, lest he take Gavin's name and the number of the Anglia also. Finally the detective blew a short blast on his whistle, and a large police car appeared from nowhere and drew up.

I turned on the righteous indignation. "I've read all the law books," I said. "Not one of them says that the citizen must know the number of the car he's driving."

Kay now came out of the hotel, joined us and began confirming everything I said. But our arguments merely exasperated the detective. At all costs, we wanted to avoid being run in on suspicion of car-stealing, even if we could prove our innocence and be released in the morning.

"Look," I said. "There is a man sitting round the corner in an Anglia car who can prove everything I'm saying. He's got the car-hire receipt."

The detective went off to check it, taking Alan with him as surety. A moment later he returned, conversing affably with Gavin and comparing the car-hire receipt with the number of the car, which he had carefully written down in his little black book.

"I hope you're satisfied, Constable," I said sententiously. "You nearly made a terrible blunder."

He apologized again and again. There were, it seemed, many dishonest people about, and one had to do one's duty. As we drove away we suddenly relaxed. To my astonishment, I discovered that I had enjoyed every minute of the excitement. This was something nearer to honorable fight than the ignoble brush with the watchman, when I had lied like a petty criminal held by the ear.

We were certain that the hotel proprietor and the detective would later connect us with the disappearance of the Stone. Yet neither of them did so. Looking back on it, I like to think that the Almighty sent the detective to try us before vouchsafing us the miracle of success.

Kay, feeling better after her rest, was ready for anything. We were all flushed with excitement and avid at the prospect of more. We had bid our hands to the limit: it only remained to see if all our finesses came off.

Four o'clock rang out from Big Ben. If our calculations were correct, the watchman should have finished his rounds. I parked the old Ford in a parking space not far from the Abbey, locked it and put the keys in my overcoat pocket, and rejoined the others in the Anglia.

Old Palace Yard was deserted, so Alan swung straight into the lane. The engine reverberated terrify-

"No, we haven't!" I said. "They did it. They've cheated us and kept it from us."

"Get moving!" said Gavin.

I picked up the small part. It weighed 90 pounds, but in my excitement I picked it up like a football, plunged out the door and through the darkness of the masons' yard. Kay had seen me coming and had the car halfway down the lane. She opened the door, and I rolled the piece of Stone into the back.

"It's broken," I said. "Get back into cover." By the time I was back in the Abbey the car was once more in position at the top of the lane.

Except for our gasps for breath and an occasional grunt of effort, Alan, Gavin and I made little noise. Between us we slung the weighted overcoat down the chapel steps one by one, then dragged it across the nave. Sweat blinded us. Suddenly and miraculously we were at the door, all at the end of our strength. "One more pull," said Alan. "We're not going to be beaten now." I opened the door, and as I did so I heard the car start up. Far too early, Kay was moving it forward into the lane, whence it was clearly visible from the road. "The fool!" I said, and dashed out.

"Get the car back into cover!" I spat. "We're not ready yet."

Kay looked at me coolly. "A policeman has seen me," she said. "He's coming across the road."

I got into the car beside her and silently closed the door, then switched on the lights. I fought breath into myself, and wiped the dust of the Abbey off my hands onto Kay's coat. I put one hand over the back of the seat, groped for Alan's spare coat and carefully draped it over the fragment of the Stone. Then I took Kay in my arms. She was as calm as though we were on our way home from a dance. It was our third night virtually without sleep, and we were both so drugged with tiredness that our minds were cold as ice. Fear or panic played no part.

The policeman loomed up in front of us. "What's going on here?" he thundered. Kay and I did not fall apart until he had had plenty of opportunity to observe for himself.

"It's Christmas Eve, you know, Officer," I explained.

"Christmas Eve!" he answered. "It's five o'clock Christmas morning, and you're sitting on private property here. Why did you move forward when you saw me coming?"

"I knew we shouldn't be here," I said humbly. "We put on the lights to show you that we were quite willing to move on."

"But where can we go?" asked Kay, vamping him. "The streets are far too busy."

"You should be off home," he told her severely. But then he began to warm to us. To my horror, he took off his helmet and laid it on the roof of the car. He lit a cigarette and showed every sign of staying till he had smoked it.

"There's a dark car-park just along the road," he said.

naye. I risked a breathless whistle. There was no response. My two friends had been swallowed up by the night, and my overcoat with them.

Perhaps they would be waiting for me at the parking space. I went back there and found the Ford, but no human being was in sight. I sat on the car fender and lit a cigarette. We had got the Stone to the edge of freedom, and our luck had turned against us. Success had been ours and we had failed to grasp it. We would go to jail. I drew smoke and it tasted like sand.

Suddenly a new thought struck me. I threw away my cigarette and broke into a run back to the Abbey. Presumably, Alan and Gavin had looked for the car keys in my overcoat pocket and had not found them, so perhaps they had fallen out in the Abbey as we dragged the Stone. The chance was slim, but it was the last frail hope.

I ran to the Abbey, and went in for the third time that night. I had left my torch with Kay, so on hands and knees in the darkness I groped along the route we had taken to the chapel. Then I lit matches and retraced my steps by their flickering light. Suddenly, near the door, I put my foot on something uneven — the keys. The ring had been flattened by the passage of a heavy weight, but the keys were undamaged.

I am not easily moved by thoughts of heaven and hell, but I believe that a more than canny force was round us that night.

I ran back all the way to the car and got it started. As I drove along Old Palace Yard I noticed two policemen on duty, but I had no time to wait and see them out of sight. Already there were pedestrians abroad. I looked to see the time, and it was only then I remembered that my watch had fallen from my wrist when we lifted the Stone from the Chair.

Subterfuge was now useless. I backed straight up the lane with the car lights on. I had no clear idea of what I would do, except that I was going to get the Stone into the car. It was three times as heavy as I was, and I have since seen strong men strain to move it, but success was mine if only I could muster the strength.

I caught hold of the Stone and dragged it to the car without the slightest difficulty. I raised one end up into the car; then, lifting the whole weight, I got it in end over end. I think it went quite easily. I do not remember straining. Let the cynics laugh and Archbishops howl "Sacrilege!" but the hands of God were over mine when I lifted that Stone.

As I drove from the lane the night watchman was telephoning the police to report his loss. I did not know that then, but it would have made no difference.

I had stared into the cold eyes of defeat and seen them warm to victory. In my elation, I shouted and sang. The evil luck which had dogged Scotland for six centuries was shattered, and she could enter on glori-

possibly could. I do not know how we got back into town, for we had only a vague idea of the road. But eventually we approached the Abbey again. At the parking space there was no one in sight, but the overcoat, now worn and torn beyond repair, was still lying there where Alan and Gavin had left it!

Alan and I drove to Reading, arriving about ten o'clock. I left him in the Station Square, and after we had wished each other luck, I set off for Wales.

I had assumed that the police would connect our being questioned outside Kay's hotel with the disappearance of the Stone. But presently I began to feel that I was perhaps being overcautious in laying down a false trail. None of the police cars I passed showed the slightest interest in me, so I decided to return to Reading and help Alan and Gavin retrieve the Stone. It was a wise decision. Had I continued to give the police credit for the intelligence I thought they possessed, I would have arrived hopelessly in Wales, and Alan would have had the whole responsibility for moving the Stone, for Gavin never arrived in Reading.

I met Alan there and he was glad to see me. Together we waited and met each train from London, our hopes dwindling as we saw no sign of Gavin. At half past four we gave up, pressed the starter and headed back for the Stone.

On the way, we stopped at a telephone box and I called Neil. He was [illegible]

"Never mind talking riddles," he said when I started to use the cumbersome code we had invented. "I'll take the risk. You've been on the radio, and you're in all the papers. The border roads are closed for the first time in 400 years, and the whole of Scotland's mad with excitement. There are two descriptions out; they're good but not 100 percent accurate. How are you standing up to it?"

"Fine!" I said. I could have listened to him all night.

"Well, lie low," he said. "And good luck!"

We climbed back into the car and went on, still worried about Gavin's absence, which seemed inexplicable. (Later we learned that in a London restaurant Gavin had noticed a man regarding him with suspicion. When he left, the man followed, shadowing him persistently. By the time he had shaken off the pursuer it was too late for our rendezvous in Reading, so he took a train back to Glasgow.)

As Alan and I drove back toward the Stone I fell silent, thinking of the reaction to what we had done. In Scotland we had revived something of the spirit which had kept us the oldest unconquered nation in Europe; more remarkable, our action had had almost as great an effect in England. While the Abbey hounds snarled and the planners polished their pince-nez, and the resources of law and order fluttered, ordinary men who love to see the pompous [illegible]

o'clock with a marvelous feeling of relief. The very trees and hedges seemed more friendly, and we knew that if we were ever hard pressed we would only have to knock on a door and a friend would open it. All Scotland was our fireside and every Scotsman was our kin.

Glasgow was like a pleasant dream. I had expected to return to my melancholy little room with its unmade bed, so I was grateful when Alan insisted I spend the night at his home. His family welcomed me in and the warmth of their happiness was wrapped like a blanket around us.

Sitting by a crackling fire, Alan and I told our story in all its fantastic detail. We tripped over each other to prompt our memories, and always we would be interrupted and a newspaper would be thrust into our hands so that we might read what the world was saying. The room was light; the fire leaped and blazed; these were our own people. We could hardly believe it.

To our intense delight we learned that Kay had been there only a few hours previously, before going on north to her home, and now we heard her story.

After she left me Kay stopped at another traffic light, and as she moved off heard a great crash behind her. She pulled over to the side and, to her dismay, saw her portion of the Stone lying on the road ten yards behind her. In my excitement I had forgotten to close the trunk properly and it had swung open. Kay is a small girl, and that bit of the Stone weighs 90 pounds. Without a thought she picked it up, staggered to the trunk and put it in, this time making sure the lid was tight.

Kay left the car with unsuspecting friends in Birmingham and came home by train. (A fortnight later I was to go there and drive home the Anglia with the piece of Stone. I hope these good English people have forgiven us all for our deception.)

When we had heard Kay's story, Alan and I felt quite happy. A meal was waiting for us, but we were too tired to eat. Common decency howled for a bath, but common decency went unheard. Stiff and weary, we undressed and fell into bed.

Now, above all, we had to get into our usual haunts and act in a normal fashion, for our absence might have been noted. We decided to be social buffoons, objects of contempt rather than suspicion. We would talk and speculate about the Stone until we became Stone bores. In our cups we would boast that we had taken it, or that we had been ready to take it if someone had not forestalled us. We would talk like any other young Nationalist extremist. It was the safest thing we could do, since the Glasgow police were too intelligent ever to bother with any of the avowed extremists.

To my surprise the University Union, which should have been deserted since it was Christmas vacation, was filled with all the familiar figures, and there was endless con-

and discovered that the front passenger seat could be lifted completely out and be replaced by the Stone. True, the passenger would be uncomfortable. But with a traveling rug over the Stone and a coat over the passenger's knees, nothing would be visible so long as we kept the near side door locked.

It was eight o'clock the next evening when we drove out of London toward Rochester. The road was almost deserted. One after another, Alan and I picked out our landmarks in the gray night. There was the little cart track beside which we had first hidden the Stone; a few miles farther on a familiar line of bushes. Then we swept past the line of trees. Before them, two dancing fires cast shadows on a gypsy caravan.

The chances were a million to one against it; such a thing was unbelievable, but there was no doubt about it. The gypsies were camping directly on top of the Stone. We had traveled 450 miles in vain. The Stone was guarded as surely as if it were back in Westminster Abbey.

Two hundred yards up the road we stopped the car and walked down toward the fire.

There were two caravans. We drew near the first, where an ancient gypsy couple sprawled against the fence, their boots outstretched to the blaze. The man could have put his hand through the fence and touched the Stone.

"Can we have a heat at your fire?" Neil asked. The woman invited us in with a smile. We sat silent for a long time in the firelight, and then Neil started to talk. He talked about the gypsies, the free life they lived and how they were harried by the authorities. He told them about our little country in the north which, like the gypsies, was striving to preserve its liberty and be itself. Then he talked about liberty itself, and how in the end it is the only precious thing. Freedom could be preserved only in men's hearts, and as soon as they stopped valuing it, it disappeared. "We're not like that," he ended. "And to keep our freedom we need something out of that wood. We are doing right, but we will go to jail if we are caught."

The man, who had as yet scarcely spoken, answered him. "You can't get it just now," he said without moving. "There's a local man at the next fire; you can't trust him."

For a long time we continued staring into the glowing fire as though it contained all wisdom and all knowledge. At last a man came from the direction of the other fire, mounted his bike and rode off down the road. Now it was safe. My excitement uncoiled like a spring and I vaulted the fence. The Stone was exactly as we had left it, untouched. The four of us, with the aid of two gypsy men, manhandled it up the slope and into the car.

I fumbled in my pocket and produced three pounds, which I offered to one of the gypsies. "No!" he said, "No!" Feeling like a commoner among kings, I thanked them for their hospitality, and we left the

ONE NIGHT in December 1950, with three other young Scottish patriots, I broke into Westminster Abbey and removed the Coronation Stone — Scotland's own Stone of Destiny. It was a spectacular deed that fired the imagination of men everywhere. By recovering the Stone for Scotland we righted an ancient wrong and struck a symbolic blow at the very heart of Englishry. Yet the exploit hurt no one. And this too was symbolic; for violence and destruction are anathema to the Scots, whom I consider the most civilized people in the world.

It is almost forgotten that Scotland is the oldest nation in Europe. Our political institutions have been entirely absorbed by the English Crown and are administered by a Parliament which is only ten percent Scottish. Yet, in spite of this we have preserved our church, our own courts of justice and our own distinct legal system. Above all we have preserved our character as Scotsmen.

For two and a half centuries Scotland's pride has been a shrunken thing. But the war helped revitalize our sense of "community," and when my generation returned from the armed forces we found a spirited, growing Nationalist movement working for a measure of self-government. The aim was not separation from England but a more honorable union, "in all loyalty to the Crown and within the framework of the United Kingdom." Yet in spite of overwhelming popular support for the Nationalists, the government refused to accede to even their most moderate demands.

In Glasgow University in those days there were many of us who sat and talked about many things, but always the talk came back to Scotland. And gradually as the months rolled on and the politicians in London continued to neglect Scotland, the talk got bitter. As a 25-year-old law student who dabbled in politics, I did not consider myself a man of action. But now my political discontent became a burning passion that would not let me rest. And it grew plain to me that I was to be thrust into action.

It was no sudden flash of inspiration which turned us to the Stone of Destiny. This Stone has always been associated with the right of government. The Coronation Throne of a long line of Celtic kings, in 1296 it was wrenched from the Abbey of Scone with sword and arson by Edward I, King of England, who took it from the Scotsmen as the symbol of their liberty. The memory is one not easily erased from Scottish minds. When Robert Bruce had carried Scotland to final victory, one of the terms of the peace was that the Stone of Destiny be returned. But this covenant was never honored and the Stone remained in Westminster Abbey.

By early November 1950 I had definitely admitted to myself that

No? I made a mental note. A few other leading questions and another prowl round showed me where the night watchman's office was situated. I left the Abbey with all the information I required for successful burglary. Most of that night I wandered round back streets in the vicinity, studying the approaches to the building and observing all signs of police activity. On the train for Glasgow next morning, I was tired but full of burning contentment. I now knew beyond all shadow of doubt that what we planned was possible. The difficulty was there, but that was a challenge.

Neil and I evolved the following plan. One of us would conceal himself in the Abbey toward closing time, hiding in a chapel which was then under repair. I claimed this honor for myself, for the conception had been mine. After being locked in I would lie quietly in hiding until 2 a.m., or as soon thereafter as the night watchman had completed his rounds. I would then screw the lock off an outer door and admit an accomplice. We would remove the Stone from the Chair, lash it to an iron bar and carry it outside, where a small inconspicuous car would be waiting. On a quiet side street the Stone would be transferred to a larger and faster car, which would head straight for Dartmoor, where the Stone would be hidden temporarily. Meanwhile, the small car would race toward Wales: if it had been seen at the Abbey, it would lead the police on a false scent.

This was a good plan. But in practice it had to be sorely amended under stress of unforeseeable circumstances.

CHRISTMAS seemed to me the only possible time for the enterprise, for the English celebrate very thoroughly then, and I maintained we should come down on them while they were lying in drink with their minds unbuttoned. Neil had inescapable engagements for every day over the holidays and argued that the plan would keep. But I was stubborn. Secrets of this nature do not mature like good wine. Moreover, I had screwed my resolution to the last turn, and I was not sure that it would not suddenly unwind if I was denied the prospect of immediate action. "I'll go myself," I told him.

Then one evening I attended a university dance with Kay Mathieson, a young teacher of domestic science whose political views were almost identical with mine. Small and dark and large-eyed, Kay is a Highlander, and she speaks with the quiet tongue that knows English only as a second language. I was moody and depressed, thinking of who among the people I knew would willingly throw over their prospects and come to London. Suddenly I knew without any doubt. Kay was an idealist who would not be greatly concerned about her own welfare if she could do something to serve the movement. A pretty woman is never sus-

den except for a slight stoutness, which, since Gavin ascribed it to my inherent motherliness, kept us laughing all the way as we drove to the Abbey and parked the car. I was approaching the supreme adventure of my life. Excitement seized me again, but I kept it down until it was only a pressure along my ribs, which occasionally unwound itself in an involuntary twitch.

Big Ben struck 5:15 as I walked casually into the Abbey out of the shining, noisy darkness of a London evening. Inside, the light was soft, yet it seemed to illuminate me and probe me out as a persistent and sinister visitor to the Abbey. I pulled my heavy coat about me and hated the damning jimmy at my side.

Followed by Gavin, I walked slowly up the north transept, pausing only to gaze at an occasional Latin inscription. The venerable guide was in conversation with a woman and he paid no attention to me. I walked on and into the shadows of the north transept. I hoped to hide at the extreme end of it, under a cleaner's trolley. Down in the aisle Gavin walked slowly past. No one else was in sight. He nodded to me briefly, absent-mindedly. I crawled in under the trolley and, having covered my face with my coat, lay perfectly still.

Steam from my breath condensed on my face. The hard stone of the Abbey floor under me was less real than my heart, which thudded and pounded and threatened to stick in my gullet. This, I had always sup-

oned would be the most dangerous part. To be caught with my pockets stuffed with housebreaking tools before I had a chance even to touch the Stone would be ignominy, and I was young enough to fear derision more than anything else.

Gradually I relaxed. My leg ceased to twitch. Quarter to six struck and then the hour. Gavin would now be out of the building, for it closed at six. When quarter past six struck I looked up. God be praised! The lights were out. I could now move in safety to St. Paul's Chapel, where I was certain I could hide safely.

Hearing nothing but the vague murmur of traffic in the world outside, I crept stiffly from my hiding place. I had gone three paces when I suddenly heard the jangling of keys. Even as I listened, a light swept round the corner of the transept and shone in my face. White and shocked with fear, I looked up at a tall, bearded watchman.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

"I've been shut in," I said, hanging my head on my chest and making myself smaller.

"Why didn't you shout, then?" he asked. His voice was clear and authoritative, but not unkind.

"I thought I'd get a row," I said, and my voice quivered on the edge of tears.

"Well," he said, "you're lucky I didn't hit you on the head. We're patrolling about here all night, you know."

breaking into it. We marshaled the facts that we knew. First, the Poets' Corner door, the most secluded door to the Abbey, was of pine and could possibly be forced from the outside. Second, we had learned that a new watchman came on at 11 o'clock. If he patrolled all night he could be expected to hear us forcing the door. However, none of us believed that an unsupervised watchman would pad about the dim corridors of the Abbey more often than, say, once every two hours. Then, too, all round us were signs of the wildest conviviality; there was always the chance that the new watchman would have blunted his perceptions by spending his evening in a pub.

A lane led from Old Palace Yard to the door we intended to force. The door itself was partly hidden from the road by a flying buttress, but access to it was barred by a locked and brightly lit gate, which was in full view. We felt we could by-pass this gate, however, by forcing our way through a masons' repair yard which was fenced off only by a wooden hoarding in which there was a padlocked door.

We were delighted to see that insobriety was abroad in the streets. That would keep the police busy. We left the cars and walked aimlessly about, calling out "Merry Christmas" to everyone we passed. As time melted away we became more and more strung up. Conditions were ideal.

When Big Ben struck two o'clock we knew that our time had come. A few people still sang through the streets, but they were a camouflage rather than a danger. With our jimmy we quickly forced our way through the masons' yard and reached the Poets' Corner door. But we would not assail this until we had got Kay from her hotel.

I drove over with Alan in the old Ford, and pulled up outside Kay's hotel while Gavin waited round the corner with the Anglia. I hammered on the door. At length a voice asked, "What do you want?"

"I want Miss Warren," I said.

"All right, all right," complained the voice. "I'll tell her."

While I waited out in the car beside Alan a man presently came up to the hotel door, knocked and was immediately admitted. We wondered what business could bring him to the hotel at this late hour. As we laughed and joked rather uneasily the stranger came back out of the hotel and walked straight toward us. The hotel manager, suspicious of our call at 3 a.m., had telephoned the police!

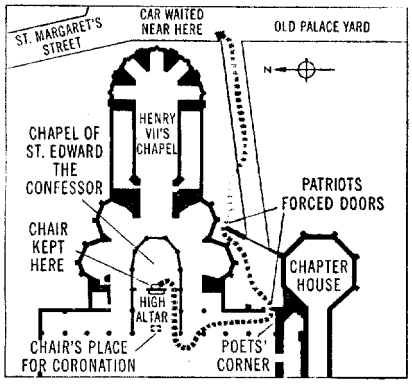
The official flashed a Metropolitan Police Warrant Card under my nose. "I'm a detective," he said. "Can I see your driving license?"

I fished it out and gave it to him. He took down my name and address. My palms sweated and the jimmy buttoned up under my jacket seemed as large as a tree trunk.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"Several hundred cars have already been stolen tonight. What is

ingly off the Abbey walls. Halfway up the lane he switched out the lights. At the top, we got out and Kay slipped into the driving seat.



Alan, Gavin and I crossed a patch of light and stood against the Poets' Corner door, crucified by the rays of a gas lamp. At least we should not work in darkness. Gavin put his shoulder against the door. "The jimmy!" he hissed.

At first we made little impression on the door. We were desperately afraid of noise, and each creak sounded like a hammer blow. But finally we deadened our ears to noise; the three of us put our weight on the end of the jimmy, and the door flew open with a crash that Kay, waiting in the car, heard and shuddered to hear.

But our way was now open. We swept into the Abbey, pulling the door closed behind us. A light glowed dimly at the west end of the nave, but the rest was in black darkness. We went down the [illegible] sept in silent hurry and crept up a flight of steps into the Confessor's Chapel.

In the darkness of the chapel my torch shone wanly on the green marble tomb of Edward I. The Stone was before us, breast high, under the seat of the Coronation Chair, which stood on a kind of trestle. We prized gently at the bar of wood which ran along the front of the chair but, dry with age, it cracked and splintered. The three of us worked in a sweating fever to get the Stone out. With one man holding the torch, one prizing at the sides with the jimmy and one pushing at the back, we moved it. It slid forward. The English Chair would hold it no longer.

One last heave. "Now!" said Gavin. I pushed from the back. It slid forward and they had it between them. But it was too heavy to carry, so I laid my overcoat on the ground; we would drag the Stone on that.

I seized one of the iron rings and pulled strongly. It came easily — too easily for its weight. "Stop!" I said and shone my torch.

I shall not forget what the faint light revealed: I had pulled away a section of the Stone, and it lay in terrifying separation from the main part. Everything was now turned bad. "We've broken Scotland's luck," came Alan's awful whisper.

Suddenly I saw that most of the broken area was very dark. The Stone had been cracked for years and they had not told us.

"Och, well," said Kay, thrusting her head into the lion's mouth, "we can always get you to run us in and give us comfortable cells."

"No, no," said the constable knowingly. "There's not a policeman in London would arrest you tonight."

"A good night for crime!" I said, and we all laughed.

All this time I had been conscious of a scraping sound going on behind the wooden fence. Kay heard the noise, too, and we engaged the constable in loud conversation: surely Alan and Gavin would hear us and be warned. But out of the corner of my eye I saw the door in the fence slowly open. Gavin's head and shoulders appeared. Suddenly he froze. He had seen the policeman. His lips formed an amazed oath. Inch by inch he edged back, and the door closed behind him.

The policeman finished his cigarette and put on his helmet. "You'd better be going now," he said.

"We had indeed!" I said, wiping the sweat out of my eyes.

Kay started the engine. Never has a clutch been let in so jerkily; never has a car veered from side to side so crazily. I looked back: as Kay intended, the constable was following us down the lane — too amazed at the crazy driving to pay attention to anything else. But once we reached the road, Kay put her toe down hard on the accelerator.

Now the fat was properly in the fire. We still had a chance, but it was a slim one. Somehow we must get back [illegible] of the Stone, which still lay with our two friends in the masons' yard, and get it into hiding. Meanwhile, the Anglia was a dangerous car — the policeman must have taken the license number. We decided that Kay should set off westward, in the hope that she would be outside the area of greatest police activity before morning.

At the parking space, I transferred the piece of Stone from the back seat to the trunk, and took Alan's old overcoat to wear myself. Then I felt in my pockets for the keys to the other car — to my horror I remembered they were in my overcoat, with the boys in the Abbey.

Without another backward glance we drove off. I got out at a traffic light, wished Kay luck and for the benefit of a passer-by kissed her good night. "It's been a lovely party, darling," I said. Her eyes flashed appreciation of the irony, and she drove off.

I went back toward the Abbey at a jog trot. When I passed a policeman I kept my head well down lest it was our friend and he should recognize me. No one was in sight as I swung into the lane and passed through the door into the masons' yard. There the Stone lay, but of Alan and Gavin there was no sign.

"Alan! Gav!" I called in a whisper, but the whole night had gone silent. Fear ran a feather over my hair.

I eased open the broken door of the Abbey and went in. The light [illegible]

ous rebirth. Let them take me now, and all Scotland was at my back. I was filled with a wild exultation and something which was very near to divine glory.

I reckoned that I had at most an hour and a half before the police could get their forces marshaled. I must find open ground, and hide the Stone.

The trouble was that I did not know the road. Stupid from lack of sleep, I lost my way and wandered round in a maze of side streets. A cold, gray dawn was beginning to creep in from the east and, almost in tears, I was driving desperately down a back street when the last of the miracles happened which brought us success. There, plodding away from me, were the familiar figures of Gavin and Alan. I pulled up with a squeal of brakes, calling, "I've got it, I've got it. Look! It's in there!"

I could take only one of them with me, for with all the weight I was fearful of the car's springs. Alan fell inside. We agreed to meet Gavin at Reading Station that afternoon at four o'clock. Then I let in the clutch, and Alan and I raced south with the Stone, exhausted and lightheaded with victory.

"I did it myself! I did it myself!" A hundred times I recited all that had happened to me since I had left him in the Abbey. Then it was Alan's turn to talk. When he and Gavin heard us drive away from the Abbey they had crept down the lane, almost on the heels of the policeman. They reached the parking space just as Kay and I were driving away in the Anglia. Not finding the keys for the other car in my overcoat pocket, they assumed that I had them with me. Then a police car passed them and, thinking the game was up, they started to walk aimlessly until, by the grace of God, I found them.

"What happened to my overcoat?" I asked.

Alan looked round anxiously. "Didn't you get it?" he asked. "We left it just behind the car."

That was a blow, for my name was on it. We had got the Stone away, but we had left behind us a complete case for the prosecution, handing the police the evidence on a tray.

Alan and I drove southeast toward Rochester. Out in the open country we followed a little cart track off the main road. Then we dragged the Stone out of the car and left it lying in a hollow, half hidden by a few sprays of bramble. It was a precarious hiding place, but at the moment we had no alternative.

We felt sure the police had circulated the number of our car. Moreover, since my duel with the detective outside Kay's hotel, I was too dangerous to be allowed near the Stone. It seemed best then for Alan alone to meet Gavin at Reading at the appointed hour of four. Together they could hire another car and transport the Stone to Dartmoor, while I acted as a decoy by making for Wales in the Ford.

First, however, we drove back to London, for we wanted to recover [illegible]

amusement and felt we had done something they could applaud.

We were desperately tired, but responsibility weighed on us. What we had done was now a public affair, and nothing must be permitted to turn our faces north until we had put the Stone where it could never be found. It was a duty which laughed at rest.

We retrieved the Stone from where we had left it, and that night wandered over half the county of Kent, hunting for a proper hiding place. About midnight, near Rochester, we found an ideal place. Some ten yards off the road there was an easily identifiable line of trees and a steep embankment littered with straw and scraps of paper. Halfway down the slope I hollowed a recess in the soft earth; we slid the Stone into it and covered it with earth and litter. It was a good job.

Our duties ended, I stumbled into the back seat and Alan put his toe down for Scotland. I slept like a dead man. It was almost 90 hours since we had been in bed and we were very tired, but the homing instinct, strong within us, made us reject the idea of going to a hotel. So we spelled each other at driving several times during the night, and continued homeward; at times we parked by the side of the road and both slept.

Next morning, delirious with tiredness, we shouted and sang triumphantly in the cold brisk air. We had raided the very heart of Englishry and were returning unscathed, while all around us the authorities gnashed their teeth and held committee meetings. So now we careered up England, roaring and singing, to the amazement of the stolid English pedestrians, who must have thought us drunk.

It was the middle of the afternoon before we were stopped. I was sleeping in the back seat when Alan said quietly: "It's the police, Ian."

I was awake immediately. A police car had pulled alongside and signaled us to stop, and now two constables came round to Alan's window, notebooks at the ready. They asked for his driving license and noted the name and address. "Where have you been?" they asked. "London," replied Alan promptly.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," he said, simply.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"It's this here Coronation Stone," said one of the constables. "You haven't seen it, have you?"

I could have laughed at the folly of the question. "No!" I cried. "But I've heard about it. It's a good show. Should have been done years ago."

The constable looked at me sourly. "We live on the one island and some think we should be all one people," he said.

"Aye, maybe," I said. "But the Scottish people don't think that, and they're the ones who have the edge on you today."

Without a word the constable handed Alan back his license and waved us on. We could not believe our luck.

We crossed the border about ten

ut the Stone. Solemnly
ed who might have done
This man was accounted
man might have done it, but he drank too much to keep a secret; another had been talking about doing it for years, but was a vainglorious lout with no ability.

"Well, I'm beaten," I said. "I reckoned I knew every Nationalist in Scotland, and I still can't put my finger on who did it."

Our double bluff worked and, all things considered, there was remarkably little suspicion of us. Three months later, when Scotland Yard's chief superintendent roped us all in for questioning, I overheard one student say: "What! Ian Hamilton have anything to do with the Stone? Nonsense! The only person who would ever suspect Ian Hamilton is Ian Hamilton."

There was one more matter to be settled. As yet no one knew whether the Stone had been taken by anarchists, Communists or souvenir hunters. In addition, His Majesty was distressed, and we felt that we had to clarify our position. We therefore prepared a petition to the King, reaffirming our loyalty to His Majesty and stating our reasons for removing the Stone.

There was much discussion as to where to post this petition. I wanted to send it out from Edinburgh, for I thought we might bluff the police into concentrating their inquiries there. The others wanted it sent out from Glasgow. The police, they contended, would expect us to leave such a document as far as possible from our own doorstep; if we left it in Edinburgh, they would suspect Glasgow, and vice versa. They overestimated the intelligence of the forces against us. In actual fact, we left the petition in a Glasgow newspaper office and it was on Glasgow that the police immediately concentrated their inquiries. The stupidity of Scotland Yard was our most constant danger.

OVER the New Year's week-end we drove south to recover the Stone. A second expedition was perhaps foolhardy at that time, with the police hunt at its height. They had been stopping all cars on the border for the last five days, but they could not go on doing that indefinitely and I assumed the border would be open again in two days. In the back of my mind lurked the threat of impending arrest; I wanted to see the Stone recovered before that happened.

Our advisers insisted that those of us who had been in London at Christmas should not go back again, with the police looking for us, but I was not going to be shouldered out now. Alan came, too, since it was his father's Armstrong-Siddeley car we meant to use. Our new teammates were Neil and a friend, John Josselyn. In high spirits, we set off at night, over ice-bound roads.

En route, the question of the best place in the car to put the Stone was on my mind. If the police stopped us I wanted at least a chance to bluff it out. I checked over the car

warmth of their fire. I do not know if the gypsies realized whom they helped that night. I like to think that they did.

We turned homeward, cruising gently into London, and pulling quietly in and out of the Saturday-night crowds at Trafalgar Square and Marble Arch. The newsboys were still shouting the headlines, "STONE: ARREST EXPECTED SOON," while the Stone passed by half a yard away. But we passed through London without challenge and continued north.

It began to snow, making the driving a nightmare. We kept to the secondary trunk roads, which were not so busy as to be carefully watched but which were busy enough not to be blocked by the snow. We stared into the white hell, skidded, and edged round corners, thinking of the bloody mush the Stone would make of us if we overturned. But gradually we forgot our fears. As each mile came up on the clock, it meant we had brought the Stone yet a mile closer to Scotland. Even if we were finished now, every mile had made history.

Sunday morning was clear and fresh. We stopped to purchase some newspapers, and as we went on, Neil read out titbits. The papers bulged with what we had done. Everyone of position in England was very huffy indeed. While the common Englishman laughed and wondered why Scotland had not had self-government long ago, his rulers called us thieves and fanatics. I did not feel like a fanatic. I felt like a wee boy who had pressed a fire alarm, and who stands on the curb and watches the fire engines roar past.

"Look at this," said Neil, and he held out a newspaper with the headline: "STONE: £1000 REWARD." I had a great feeling of pride. I had never been worth so much money before. Yet I felt a twinge of uneasiness — £1000 might be enough to make the most honest man sell a stranger.

We made it back to Scotland without incident, however, and at half past two we slipped across the border. A few miles inside Scotland we stopped. The symbol of her liberty had come back to Scotland, and some sort of rude ceremony was needed to mark the return. We drew back its covering and exposed the Stone to the air of Scotland for the first time in 600 years. From our provision basket we produced a gill of whisky we had kept for just this occasion. We each poured a little of the fine spirit on the Stone and proposed a toast. Thus quietly with little fuss, with no army, with no burning of abbeys or slaying of people, we brought back the Stone of Destiny.

That same night we delivered the Stone to a factory outside of Glasgow, where it was put away in a packing case. Now our job was done and others were to take up where we had left off.

THE MONTHS that followed were a period of inactivity on our part, and we were all tense. As the Stone

Yet we were not quite at peace. We had never intended to remove the Stone completely from all ken, and we had now to weigh the advantages of bringing it again to light. There were many considerations, but our main reason for action was that the Stone was valueless to us hid in a factory cellar. All along we ourselves had set the pace. We would end by putting the ball at the feet of authority. If they left the Stone in Scotland we had won our point, but if they snatched it away they would outrage Scottish feeling.

We arranged to have the Stone repaired by the best mason in Scotland. It would be given to the Church of Scotland at the ruined Abbey of Arbroath, where in 1320, with the sound of the North Sea in their ears and the smell of their burnt homes still in their nostrils, the Estates of Scotland had met to reaffirm their freedom. On the morning of April 11, 1951, Neil and I left Glasgow with the Stone of Destiny. At midday we carried it down the grass-floored nave of Arbroath Abbey to the high altar.

I never saw the Stone again. The authorities swooped upon it and bundled it back across the border by night, while Commons, Lords and clergy raised their voices in protest.

But I still remember that moment at the altar where we left the Stone, and where I heard the voice of Scotland speak as clearly as it did in 1320: "We fight not for glory nor for wealth nor for honor, but only and alone for freedom, which no good man surrenders but with his life."

THE Coronation Stone was returned to Westminster Abbey, and effective measures have been taken to safeguard it, particularly in view of the approaching Coronation. However, the authorities decided that "the public interest did not require" that the four young Scottish conspirators should be prosecuted.

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